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ABSTRACT

In adjusting to their new environment, Hmong refugees to the United States have attempted to preserve cultural traditions while accommodating the demands of American society and culture. The Hmong refugee background includes a tradition of close family ties and self sufficiency in the Laotian hinterlands; a history of war, hardship, and drastic life changes; and life in Thailand's refugee camps that was characterized by uncertainty, the distress of losing a homeland, and forced dependence on foreign aid. Their arrival in the United States has required new adjustments in culture, housing, language, education, employment, health practices, and family relations. The process of adjustment has resulted in some cultural discontinuities. While the traditional sense of kinship and the characteristics of independence and initiative continue to be reflected in Hmong life, changes have had to be made in family roles, marriage customs, and employment practices. Some culture gaps remain due to differences in American and Hmong perceptions concerning competitive employment, assimilation, and individual versus group worth. Bridging these gaps to achieve a cultural fit in Hmong adaptation to American life depends not only on how the Hmong adjust, but also on the extent to which the American mainstream recognizes a unique Hmong identity within the larger society. (MJL)

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**The Hmong in America - Their Cultural
Continuities and Discontinuities**

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The Hmong in America - Their Cultural Continuities and Discontinuities

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Introduction

This paper is a brief exploration of cultural adaptation theory through a case study of the Hmong resettlement in the U.S. Cultural adaptation is defined here as the degree and qualitative change to which the cultural system alters its internal functions (cultural traditions, values, behavior) and the external environment to achieve a "cultural fit". Its conceptualization is an extension of the family adaptation theory developed by McCubbin (McCubbin and Patterson, 1980). It is also based on the Piagetian conceptual framework that a new cultural adaptation is built upon previous experiences of adaptation, resulting in a spiral effect. It is conceptualized as a reciprocal and interactive process between the minority culture and the majority culture. Specifically, we shall examine the following questions:

- 1) What are the cultural characteristics and internal resources of the minority culture?
- 2) How does the majority culture receive the minority culture and what support systems are provided for them?
- 3) What are the cultural continuities (assimilation) and cultural discontinuities (accommodation) of the minority culture in adapting themselves for a "cultural fit" in their new environment?
- 4) What impact might the acculturation of the minority culture have upon the development of the majority culture?

I. Historical and Cultural Background of the Hmong

The Hmong people are Asians, originally from China who have migrated southward for centuries (Garrett, 1974). Today, they are found in southern China, northern Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. Linguistically, they are classified into

the Sino-Tibetan Language Family. Culturally, they are closely related to the Chinese. They call themselves Hmong which means "Free People".

Traditional Life in the Mountains of Laos. The Hmong who have resettled in the U.S. are mostly from northern Laos. They migrated there from China about 150 years ago. They established villages on the highlands and engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture in the mountains. Economically, they cultivated dry rice for a basic food staple, opium for cash income, and livestock for meat, sale, transportation and sacrifice. Socially and politically, a patrilocal, patrilineal clan system dominated the Hmong culture.

The household was the basic social unit in which the son was responsible to the father, and the father to the household head. The household head was not a dictator and his decisions represented "his considered opinion after his discussions with the adult men under his authority" (Barney, 1967, p. 276). By exogamous marriage a daughter became a member of her husband's household and was subservient to him and his family. Polygamy was permitted and levirate was practiced. The household properties belonged to the household as a whole, and production was a household venture. Socialization of the young was the responsibility of the entire household, not just that of the parents. Age role and sex role were learned early through kinship terms and prescribed social roles. Girls were taught skills in household tasks, folk songs and poems. Boys were taught production skills, ceremonial songs and how to participate in discussion of household affairs. The qualities of cooperation, industriousness, initiative, self-reliance and responsibility to the group were highly valued and emphasized. Children learned by observing, modeling and doing. Their responsibilities in the household increased with age. Schooling was rare; only a few boys went to Laotian schools on the lowlands. Old age was greatly valued and revered. The elders represented wisdom and had the important function of transmitting oral history and cultural traditions.

The village was the basic unit of the Hmong traditional political structure. The village chief served in much the same way between the households in his village as the household head did between his household members. He was an honored leader who mediated the community affairs and represented the village to other villages and the outside world. The district chief, who usually was a village chief, served as a communicative link between the villages in his district and the Laotian national government.

The Hmong people have no surnames, only clan names. There are about twenty clans (Vang, unpublished paper). Clan ancestors were worshipped. They are vaguely identified with the clan "fathers" of the first creation in their folklore. Fua Tai, the Creator "originally had close communication with man. He became dismayed with man and left him in the charge of the world of the Tlan" (Barney, 1967, p. 287). Tlans are spirit-like beings who may bring good or bad fortunes. Thus taboos and rituals are observed to solicit their good will and help. Shamans are said to be powered by tlans to cure the sick, to interpret dreams and to communicate between the worlds of the people and the tlans. They played an important role in the village life. The animistic beliefs of the Hmong reflect not only their recognition of both human potentials and human limitations in coping with their environment, but also their conception of the world as a place in which people are in harmony with nature.

In summary, the Hmong life in Laos prior to 1955 may be characterized by their closely knit family life and the kinship system and their self-sufficient independent living in the remote mountain areas.

The Laotian Civil War 1955-1975. Laos became an independent country from France in 1974. Before that, the Hmong had risen in revolts with other Indo-chinese ethnic groups over the French colonial tax systems in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. During World War II, they joined forces with the Lao

and the French against Japanese invasion and became known as the fierce guerilla fighters. However, the Hmong were able to maintain the basic pattern of their traditional village life on the highlands until the Laotian Civil War broke out in 1955.

During the war from 1955 to 1975, Hmongs were on both sides: the Royal Lao government side, led by Touby Lyfoung, and the Pathet Lao side, led by Faydang Lor.¹ Their homeland was the battle ground and thousands of families were forced to relocate. The relocation not only uprooted the Hmong from their isolation in the mountains, but also altered much of their traditional ways of life. Economically, they could no longer maintain a self-sufficient living. Food supplies by air drop helped to sustain the initial period of relocation. Then agricultural production was inadequate to provide food for the family, because raising a crop was difficult in the war zone and there were only women and children to work in the fields. Most men were soldiers whose military payroll brought cash income to the family. Many families also began food shops, trades of merchandise, fish farming and taxi businesses in the relocation areas. Thus salary income and small business had by and large replaced the traditional economy. However, making a living was still a household business, as described by a Hmong resettler in the U.S. (Koumarn, IREG #16):

"So the older members of the household, who were unable to work in the fields, would preside over the shop; the able-bodied men would join the army to earn additional cash; and the remaining members of the family - the women and children - would work in the fields" (p. 13).

Socially, the Hmong household was undergoing drastic changes and was no longer self-contained. Families were separated through relocation and death.

¹ The Royal Lao side was backed by the Americans and the Pathet Lao side was backed by the North Vietnamese. Since the Hmong resettlers in the U.S. came from the Royal Lao side, this paper is concerned with their hardships and adaptation.

Many old people and children did not survive the harsh hardship of fleeing and relocation and many men were killed in the war. Polygamy increased as there were more and more widows with children and levirate was practiced to provide support to them and to maintain the household boundary. In the relocation areas, many elementary schools were built with aid from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Hmong teachers were trained in an intensive program by the Royal Lao government. Schools were taught in Laos and French. Some went on to high schools in the capital city of Vientiane. Thus the development of education and literacy seemed to bring the Hmong closer to the mainstream of Laotian life.

Politically, there was also a departure from the tradition although the basic structure of village chiefs and district chiefs continued to function in the relocation areas. Since World War II, some Hmong leaders had emerged and some began to take part in the provincial and national government. Among them, Touby Lyfoung had been promoted to a cabinet position in the Royal Lao government in 1962, and Vang Pao rose to the rank of major general in the Royal Laos Army. In the relocation areas, civilian officials were appointed to supervise district and village chiefs (Koumarn, IREG #16). There was also a rising consciousness in the Hmong to play a more active part in their national life.

In summary, the Hmong life in the war years may be characterized by their maintenance of the fabric of their traditional life and their resilience in adapting themselves to extreme hardships and life changes. As an American observed, the Hmong "have unusual initiative, adaptability, and an ability to organize themselves. This latter trait is probably based on their strong clan system." (Ward, 1967, p. 297).

Fleeing into Thailand and Life in the Refugee Camps. In 1975 the civil war came to an end when the Royal Lao government collapsed and the Pathet Lao

took over Vientiane and the 600-year-old monarchy was abolished. Many Hmongs fled into Thailand, including General Vang Pao. For those Hmong who were in or associated with the Royal Lao or those who were in the American armed and advised secret army, they became the targets of reprisal by the Pathet Lao government in the years that followed. Many of their villages were destroyed and the people were sent to re-education camps. A visitor to the refugee camps in Thailand reported the perception of the Hmong refugees and their feelings about the situation: (Koumarn, IREG #16)

" _____ Surrender is not a real option for those Hmong who were associated with the Vang Pao forces and with the Americans. _____ Such people are often shot out of hand. _____ Those surrendering Hmong _____ are taken away to "seminar" _____ and then sent to labor battalions. _____ In this situation the Hmong resisters feel that surrender amounts to death sentences one way or the other, so only two real choices remain: to go on fighting _____ or escape to Thailand" (pp. 14-15).

Thus, thousands of Hmongs made their way over land, through the jungle, across the Mekong River into Thailand. Many died, drowned or were killed on the way.

In the refugee camps, life was and still is safe but unsettled and uncertain. They live in crowded and minimal survival conditions (Garrett, 1980). Furthermore, the fabric of their traditional life is torn. Families are separated and lives are suspended in waiting for an unknown future. As a Hmong recalled his days in the Thai refugee camps: (Koumarn, IREG #16)

"Life is boring for us in the refugee camps. We are used to hard work, and in the camps there is nothing to do. All but a few of us are longing to be accepted by a third country, so we can start living and working again" (p. 16, emphasis added).

Many Hmong have registered for the U.S. resettlement program. For them to be accepted, they must be the immediate family of U.S. residents, or be former employees of U.S. government programs in Indochina, or have had close association

with the former Royal Lao government. The screening and interview procedure requires status documentation, such as proofs of U.S. services and marriage certificates, which may be difficult for the Hmong in flight to provide. The U.S. Immigration further requires clearance of any previous association with communism, use of drugs (such as opium) or experiences with polygamous marriages. The last two may pose problems for the Hmong, because the medical use of opium and levirate practice are part of their cultural traditions. Perhaps the greatest cultural gap lies in the concept of "immediate family" - to the American, it means nuclear family of two generations; to the Hmong, extended family is three or more generations. Thus, the elderly are often excluded from the resettlement program (Kansier et al., 1980) or the family may be split up. To the family conscious Hmong, this hardship is perceived as a great stressor because being together as a family is the remaining fabric of their traditional life.

In summary, the Hmong life in the refugee camps may be characterized by the great distress of losing their homeland, separation of families and the forced dependence upon foreign aids. Despite the tremendous losses they have suffered, their strong will for survival, and their patient readiness to start life anew in another country.

II. Resettlement in the U.S.

The Hmong people who came to the U.S.A. have brought with them not only their cultural heritages but also the cumulative effect of their life experiences in Laos and Thailand - their incredible hardships and their resilient adaptability. Only with a notion of where they have come from culturally and what they have gone through historically, can we begin to perceive how they may adapt to life here.

In the following, we shall discuss some of the major adjustment issues the Hmong encounter in their new life in America, how they perceive and cope with

them, and what are the resources and social supports made available to them. We shall first take a brief look at the U.S. domestic resettlement program.

Voluntary agencies are contracted with the federal government and receive \$500 for each refugee they receive and resettle. In turn, these agencies locate and prepare American sponsors who are responsible to meet the arriving families, make housing arrangements and provide basic orientation and help to living in the new world. The resettling family is eligible for a period of three years, to a variety of social services funded by the Federal Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program. The local community provides financial and medical assistance, language and job training and sometimes also employment services which are reimbursed by the federal government and channeled through the state or county welfare department. While the program is basically similar across the country there are variations in how it is administrated and delivered. There is also a wide disparity in the community attitude and receptivity to the IndoChinese Resettlement program, ranging from indifference to mixed public feelings to friendly hospitality (Gim and Litwin, 1980).

Housing. Initial housing is usually provided by the sponsors for the arriving Hmong families. Later most move into public low-income housing. When they become financially independent, some families move to private housing. Whenever possible, the Hmong families try to stay together with their relatives and friends, and recreate the elements of kinship support and mutual help in their traditional household pattern. For example, they'd pool their incomes and buy a car and own it communally, as they once did with their household horse in the mountains. Scott reported a San Diego Hmong community's recreation of a "Hmong Village" in a housing project in which the families are led by the community leaders who are chosen because of their previous leadership experiences and their literacy in English, and who serve as mediators of internal disputes and representatives to the outside world (Scott, 1979). Some Americans have expressed

their concerns about the clustering and the fear of creating Hmong ghettos and try to spread them out (Gim and Litwin, 1979). But as Professor Rudy Vecoil, director of the Immigrant History Research Center at the University of Minnesota pointed out, "we should have learned from history that people tend to live with others who are like them. It provides all kinds of support mechanisms for their community. Policy ought to be supporting of that" (Benidt, 1980).

Because of the shortage of low cost public housing in the urban areas and the declining economy in general, the Hmong families are sometimes seen as competitors for the shrinking American pie by other low-income ethnic groups. Some resentment and harassment are reported even in the generally friendly Twin Cities area (Benidt, 1980; Fredeen, 1981; Gim and Litwin, 1980; Smith, 1981). Most resentment is rooted in the perception of unfair treatment favoring the Hmong. As one American Indian said, she is not mad at the Hmong but the government is creating bad feelings against them (Smith, 1981).

The transition of life from rural living in tropical Laos to American urban living, often characterized by apartment buildings and cold climate is also difficult for the Hmong. Some hope to buy farms and get out of the city someday (Smith, 1981).

Language and Education. Learning English is perceived as the key to resettlement by both the Hmong and the resettlement agencies. English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are provided for adults and ESL or bilingual programs are provided for children, though the extent of service and the quality of programs may vary from community to community. However because of the structural difference between the two languages, many Hmongs, especially older adults, find it difficult to learn English. Hmong is a tonal, monosyllabic language with 32 consonants, 13 vowels, 7 tones (IREG #14). It has no suffixes, no grammatical gender, no conjugation of tenses or irregular words in verbs. It

has an elaborate system of classifiers for nouns (e.g., many clf books) and a system of auxiliary particles to give meaning to the sentence (e.g., forming a question by adding the word puas as in "You puas like I?" or "do you like me" in English; or forming negative sentences by adding tsis as in "I tsis go tomorrow" or "I won't go tomorrow") (IREG #15). Thus, one may see why learning English is no easy task for the multi-lingual Hmong. As some Hmong students at the Adult Community Education Center in St. Paul, Minnesota said to this writer, "We speak Lao, Thai and other (Southeast Asian) languages easy, but not English". The difficulty is compounded by the fact that many Hmong have never had school experience and are illiterate in their own language. Hmong was only a spoken language until the 1960's when two Hmong alphabet systems were developed - one based on the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) and one based on the Lao alphabet (IREG #14). The RPA alphabet was used in the Royal Lao and is used by the Hmong in America. Thus, for many Hmong who are in ESL classes, they are learning not one, English, but also literacy skills for the first time. (This writer feels that it seems necessary for the ESL teachers to know not only the skills of teaching English, but also the linguistic background of the students in order to facilitate the learning process. Perhaps for the Hmong students, oral English should be emphasized, since they are more familiar with acquisition of oral languages.)

Some Hmong communities have organized their own adult education programs to orient the new immigrants. For example, the Lao Family Community Center in St. Paul, Minnesota runs a three-month full-day program, teaching basic skills in Hmong, English, math and also life survival skills. After that, the students go on to community-run ESL classes and job training programs.

For the Hmong children, many communities provide bilingual or ESL programs in their public schools. Most of them had little previous schooling or none at all. They need support in acquiring study skills and adjusting to the American

school environment. The school needs to understand them in terms of their cultural, historical and linguistic background with compassion. The Hmong children are eager to learn and willing to work hard. Xang Vang, the director of the St. Paul Lao Family Community Center, has expressed to this writer his feeling that the bilingual program in public schools has been helpful to Hmong children and he fears that it might be going out in 2-3 years time because of funding.

Employment. Employment is another major concern to both the Hmong and the resettlement agencies. The question is what and when. The resettlement strategy in the past has been employment and economic independence as soon as possible. It had worked with the more educated and urban Vietnamese resettlers earlier. However, the Hmong, being farmers, hunters and soldiers in Laos, have come with no marketable employment skills in this urban society. It will take them more time to learn the language and to develop occupational skills. Thus there are two conflicting resettlement strategies for them: The job-first view argues that immediate employment would facilitate the learning of English and advancement on the job (the upward mobility concept of the American labor ideal) and also it would help to lessen the welfare load. The training-first view argues that a longer training period will develop higher-level occupational skills, so the Hmong will not be trapped permanently in unskilled menial jobs (Gim and Litwin, 1980).

Meanwhile the Hmong seem to have developed their own adjustment strategy. The Hmong are proud people who value greatly their independence and their tradition in self supportive labor. They used to look down on the Laotian lowlanders who held service jobs. For them unskilled labor jobs would be demeaning. But they are also realistic and practical-minded people who realize their problems in adjusting to American urban living. As Xang Vang told me in our interview, the Hmong perceive their adjustment goal as being a three-step, one-way process -

language, employment and independence. He expressed his confidence that most Hmongs can become self-supportive in 2-3 years' time. This adjustment goal has tied the Hmong to tolerate temporarily welfare support (which is seen as degrading) while attending language and job training programs in order to achieve higher-level employment. This strategy "appears to originate with Vang Pao and to be passed down to the local level ... and implemented by the community leaders" (Scott, 1979, p. 8). It is reflected in the observation by some resettlement agencies that the Hmong are less receptive to advice from sponsors and tend to turn to their clan leaders for major decisions (Gim and Litwin, 1980). It also explains why the proud Hmong would resist immediate employment and would rather choose welfare. To them the "what employment" consideration precedes the "when" question. And they are making the most out of the available educational resources and welfare support when they can - during their first three years of resettlement.

Health Care. Traditionally, the Hmong believe that when someone is sick the "soul" is attempting to leave the body of the sick person. If the person becomes unconscious, it has departed and will depart for good unless it can be brought back" (Barney, IREG #16, p. 40). Thus a shaman would be called in to chant and call to the kindly tlan or spirit for help. For home remedies, herbal medicine is used. In America, health care service is provided by the resettlement program. Sometimes the Hmong resist Western medicine because of the conflict with their traditional curing practices. The municipal health centers in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, have learned that it is important for the Hmong to have a strong personal relationship with a given physician who treats the entire family and gain the trust of them (Dunningan, 1980). Sometimes the Hmong turn back to the shaman practice when they feel Western medicine is not working, as documented in the television documentary, "No More Mountains: The Story of the Hmong" (WGBH, World #403).

Family Relations. The resettlement process and the impact of urban American life have brought some change in the family relations in the Hmong household.

The older people play a lesser role here. First, many of the elders who had the traditional role to counsel and mediate family troubles and marriage problems have not come to this country; many had not survived the hardships of fleeing and life in the refugee camps. Many others can't come because of U.S. immigration restrictions regarding opium use and polygamous practice. Thus many households may consist of only parents and children. In households with three generations or more, often the father, instead of grandfather, became the household head (Everingham, 1980). This might be due to the fact that older people tend to have a harder time in learning the language and adjusting to the Western world and Western way of doing things. It is doubly hard when their self esteem is put on the line in front of the young. This writer observed an incident in an ESL class: a 50-year-old man was trying very hard to answer a question in English. His fumbling caused some laughter from the younger students. He became very discouraged because of loss-of-face. Older people are very much respected and cared for in the Hmong family, but their authority status might lessen because they are less able to mandate family affairs in this strange land.

Women's role in the family has become less subservient. Traditionally, their place was in the home; during the war years in Laos, they had played a more active role to provide for the family. In America, they attend ESL classes and some are working outside the home which gives them a greater say in family finance and a higher status in the family (Weill, 1981). They have become more assertive with their husbands. Xang Vang, the Hmong community leader in the Twin Cities area, said in our interview that the husband-wife conflict is caused by the traditional view of the husband about women and the new idea of the wife about American equal rights for women. Some Hmongs, including Xang, approve of

the attitude change and feel that the traditional way was unfair to Hmong women.

While Hmong men's superiority and authority over their women might be undermined somewhat because of the impact of American culture upon the Hmong men-women relationship, their family responsibility and status as the household head has come sooner. It is due to family needs and their better English and quicker adjustment to the American ways of doing things. Some become Hmong community leaders because of their leadership ability in the new world and their literacy in English. Their new roles in the Hmong community organization - local and national levels - reflect not only their modernized role of the tradition and Hmong social system but also their powerful and resilient organizational skills.

The Hmong children had gone through a lot of hardships with their families before they arrived in the U.S. Their lack of school experience may be made up with their education from life experiences. (In working with children of the Boat People, this writer was impressed with their alertness, their observance of details, and their practical problem-solving skills). With some initial help and support from the school, they can excel (Everingham, 1980). They will achieve not just for themselves and family expectation but also because they share the Hmong responsibility that education is the key to respectable employment and independence in American society. Responsibility to the family is a traditional Hmong value. Early in life, children develop a sense of "social self" or the sense of who one is in relation to other people (Chan, 1977). They learn to put the family before themselves. The Hmong children, remarked Xang Vang, are still obedient to their parents now, but fears that they may become Americanized in the future, because "they (the Americans) want us (the Hmong) to do things their ways" (interview, 5/26/81). No doubt the impact of American culture will be strong. "Hmong mothers are anxious for their daughters to be expert homemakers, obedient, helpful and gracious - not to paint the eyes, wear different hair, go out a lot, and live in apartments with a boy" (Baker, 1980). This leads to the

question of how to preserve cultural identity while adapting to American society.

Cultural Identity. Language is closely related to cultural identity. The Hmong fear that if they lose their native language, they would lose their culture. Much of the Hmong history and culture has been transmitted orally, because there was no written Hmong until a quarter of a century ago. Thus it is important for the Hmong culture to have their children retain their mother tongue. But there is a great concern among the Hmong that: (Kansier, 1980):

"Over the next one or two generations, bilingualism will diminish in favor of increasing fluency in English, and native history, traditions and values will fade. The Hmong minority would then be absorbed into the American mainstream and would lose their unique ethnic identity" (p. 15).

Yet mainstreaming the minority groups is the traditional American melting pot concept and the basic policy of the resettlement program. There is some indication of a slowly changing American attitude moving toward "the search for ethnic roots and the cultivation of ethnic identities" (Gim and Litwin, 1980). The attitude for multiculturalism might help but Xang Vang, the Hmong leader in St. Paul, is not optimistic; he fears his people will "lose in the crowd" (interview, 5/26/81).

Cultural identity is also closely tied to the Hmong sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency as a people. Thus their adjustment strategy to American society discussed earlier is also an expression of their struggle to maintain their sense of cultural identity. They intend to become Hmong-Americans in good socio-economic standing and with pride in their cultural strength.

III. Cultural Continuities and Discontinuities

The Hmong are strong-willed in preserving what is important to them in their cultural traditions, and also are resilient in adjusting to what is demanded of them by the American society. Their perception of their adjustment

difficulties, their coping strategies, their use of available resources, and their continuing adaption to a Hmong life in America have resulted in a process of cultural continuities and discontinuities. We shall summarize them below.

Cultural Continuities. The family is still the major social-emotional support system to its members. Mutual help, communal sharing, and cooperation continue to function in the household. The sense of "social self" has not been weakened in the highly individualistic and competitive living environment. Individuals' sense of commitment and sense of responsibility to his/her family is strong. According to a Hmong study in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, "The traditional tsev neeg or household still exists in the United States, but we also see the formation of temporary and less integrated households that include the families of collateral relatives" (Dunnigan, p. 4).

The traditional, kinship-based village organization seemed to have transformed to become the basis of the Hmong family and community associations. The inter-lineage and inter-clan family alliances have replaced the socio-political structure of the village. Their traditional value of social self-reliance is reflected in their community self-help effort. It is evidenced in the activities in the Lao Family Community, Inc. centers, which provide not only educational programs discussed earlier, but also legal assistance and employment services. They also serve to advise Hmong on American ways of life and inform the service agencies about the needs of the Hmong.

The Hmong characteristics of initiative, independence and ingenuity are reflected in their vision of a future Hmong life in America and their quiet but persistent three-step adjustment strategy - namely, English and vocational training, employment in skilled occupations and socio-economic independence. Their tolerance of temporary dependence on welfare in order to take advantage of the educational programs provided by the resettlement program demonstrates once

again their resilience in coping. Finally their courage to challenge the American system by insisting on their own adjustment strategy rather than complying with the resettlement policy reflect their confidence in themselves as a people and their assertiveness as a minority group. Their history has been repeated again.

Cultural Discontinuities. Even though the traditional extended family still exists in America, the majority is the stem family. The families try to live close to their relatives and friends and tend to cluster together to form communities. This may be accounted for in the recent Hmong migration from one place to another within the country. But mobility is a fact of life in America. As one Hmong said to this writer, sometimes the family has to move away because of the job situation.

The traditional family roles have also changed. The elders play a lesser role, the household heads are younger and women become more assertive, as discussed earlier. Childhood may be prolonged as they share the same length of school years with their American peers. Traditionally Hmong children were considered "teenagers" between the age of 8 to 13; young adults, between 13-21; and mature adults from 21 on.

In conforming to American culture and laws, the traditional customs of levirate and polygamy are no longer practiced. Perhaps there is also no longer the need for the practices, because the Hmong extended family economy and keeping properties within the family boundary are no longer the issues of concern. The custom of bride price and bride kidnapping are also fast disappearing.

Traditionally, the Hmong were farmers and hunters, and took pride in being self-sufficient and autonomous. They labored for themselves and offered unpaid help to kin, but their labor was not for hire. Then during wartime, many Hmong became soldiers, and others ran small businesses, but they longed for peace and to return to their life in the mountains. Resettlement in the U.S. presents a

different picture. Here they have to adjust to urban living, and they seem to be resolved to the idea of employment, although some dream to have small farms someday. The compromise they are making seems to be accepting wage employment but insisting on educational opportunities for skilled or semi-skilled work.

Cultural Fit? Perhaps it is too soon to assess the cultural fit of the Hmong adaptation to American life. We have discussed their American experience, their strengths and their vulnerability. But the American society also plays a role in the adaptation process. There are some cultural gaps. The following may be identified:

- 1) Work ethic and upward mobility are American labor ideals, but the Hmong feel they must first gain sufficient footing before entering the competitive work world.
- 2) The American melting pot concept advocates assimilation of minority groups into the mainstream of American society, which is dominated by European cultures, while the Hmong strive to maintain their ethnic identity within the mainstream. They want to become Hmong-Americans.
- 3) The Americans value initiative, assertiveness and independent spirit in individuals, while the Hmong value the same in themselves as a people.

How these gaps may be bridged will depend on how the minority and the majority cultures adapt to each other. Will the Hmong overcome the dominance of the American mainstream society, and avoid the fate of the American Indians before them? Will the American people appreciate the Hmong minority assertiveness and become resilient in having the Hmong as a unique ethnic group in the mainstream society? What might be the impact of the Hmong experience upon American society? Will they reassess the make-up of their "melting pot" and come to appreciate and value the distinctive ethnic groups as rich human resources? The answers to these questions will remain to be seen.

Closing Comments

The story of the Hmong seems to suggest that human capacity for adaptation can be very resilient at the personal, family and cultural levels. How we adapt as individuals or as groups depends not only on how we perceive our hardships and our confidence in our strength, how we utilize and create our internal and external resources and how we formulate and apply our coping strategies to negotiate with the environment. It also depends on how the environment responds to our adaptive effort and how it may facilitate or constrict a "system-environment fit".

However, we are our own human environment, in that we may be our own stumbling blocks. Human adaptability can be incredible only if we will give each other (as individuals and groups) the support to adapt and to regenerate in our own ways.

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Interview and Visitations

May 26, 1981 The Lao Family Community, Inc., St. Paul, Mn.

- 1) interview with Mr. Xang Vang, Director.
- 2) observation in a bilingual classroom.

May 27, 1981 The Adult Community Education Center, St. Paul Public Schools, St. Paul, Mn.

- 1) observatons in three ESL classrooms.
- 2) informal conversations with Hmong students.

April 4 and 22, 1981 The Liberty Plaza Community Center.

- 1) observation in the nursery school for Hmong children.
- 2) observation in a homemaking class for Hmong women (St. Paul Schools Community Educational Services and Vocational Education programs).

June 11, 1981 Minneapolis Public Health Center - Indochinese Health Clinic

- 1) observation in the Maternal-Infant Clinic
- 2) discussion with Pauline Banford, social worker supervisor, Department of Public Health, Minneapolis, Minnesota.